



The Center of the Web:

Workforce Development Partnerships

THE DILEMMA IS FAMILIAR: too few resources to meet too many demands. Common to many public institutions, this problem poses special challenges to those working in community colleges, adult education and literacy programs, and workforce development organizations. These organizations all serve people who are at an economic and educational disadvantage in our society and want to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Although their missions differ, there is substantial overlap among the three, and this overlap in goals creates opportunities, particularly for community colleges.

Many communities across the country are developing community partnerships around these issues of workforce development and adult literacy. To see what makes these partnerships tick and seek “lessons learned” useful to other communities, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), created the Community Partnerships for Adult Learning initiative (C-PAL). As part of the C-PAL initiative, we identified 12 communities with promising partnerships, did extensive research on them, including site visits, synthesized our findings, and posted our study on the C-PAL website (www.c-pal.net).

Although the focus of this study was on adult education and literacy, we found that the ultimate goal of most partnerships was

to provide adults with the skills needed to succeed at work and become self-sufficient. Most partnerships included at least one—and sometimes many—community and technical colleges. Their contributions to the partnerships were as varied as the twelve communities.

In Louisville, for example, Jefferson Community College has joined forces with Jefferson County Public Schools Adult Education to create a seamless transition between their programs for adults whose needs crossed administrative boundaries. Community college faculty team-teach with adult education instructors, and testing programs are coordinated so that learners do not need to take multiple tests for placement. Students can move back and forth easily between college courses and adult education, depending on their abilities. In Holyoke, Massachusetts, Holyoke Community College’s Mentor Program draws upon students who were previously adult education learners to serve as mentors for those making the transition from adult education to college. In Portland, Oregon, Portland Community College offers free tuition for one semester to ex-inmates who complete programs at the Donald H. Londer Center for Learning, a Multnomah County Department of Community Justice program that provides education and other services to help prepare inmates to re-integrate into their communities.

Community colleges have played an even more central role, however, in several partnerships, including those in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, Houston County, Georgia, and El Dorado, Arkansas. In these places, the community college is the hub of a web of partnerships designed primarily to get adults trained and working. By serving as the anchor for the partnership, the colleges can leverage resources on behalf of their workforce development goals, forge important links to the business community, and extend the reach of their services to more adults in need of assistance.

North Idaho College (NIC) in Coeur d’Alene serves five large rural and sparsely populated counties. These counties have high rates of unemployment and low per capita income compared to state and national figures. NIC oversees and supports the North Idaho College Adult Education Center. Previously located on NIC’s campus, the Adult Education Center is now more centrally located in downtown Coeur d’Alene and operates six outreach sites across the region.

NIC focuses on three different populations: the emerging workforce, the incumbent workforce, and the transitional workforce. It is the base for multiple regional partnerships and a catalyst for programs supporting workforce development and adult education. In addition to paying the

rent for all of the adult education sites and the salary and benefits for the Center's director, NIC serves as fiscal agent for the Center and several of its partners. This allows partners to share and leverage funds with few bureaucratic obstacles. One partner can simply send an electronic message to the college controller and transfer funds to another agency.

Working with such diverse agencies as the North Idaho Workforce Investment Board, the Idaho Industrial Commission, and the Job Service, among many others, NIC also serves as one of the operators of the regional One-Stop Center. These partners share resources, referrals, and planning activities, and they collaborate to seek funds and ensure that services are not duplicated. NIC's Workforce Training and Community Education Division, which oversees the Adult Education Center, helps establish occupational training programs to meet the changing needs of local employers.

As a large organization well established in the community, NIC provides stability for many partners whose funds and objectives often fluctuate with changes in state or federal policy. It makes possible many services to a region of nearly 8,000 square miles, where distance is a formidable obstacle to service delivery. As one partner put it, "We partner for survival and have never seen a reason not to partner."

In rural Houston County, Georgia, Middle Georgia Technical College (MGTC) provides a home and significant support to the Certified Literate Community Program (CLCP), a state-supported effort to improve adult literacy rates. MGTC is the sole provider of adult education in Houston County, enrolling students from a four-county area and issuing all GED diplomas for the area.

The president of MGTC, Dr. Billy Edenfield, was instrumental in bringing the CLCP to Houston County, starting by contacting local Chambers of Commerce and enlisting their participation in a task force on adult literacy. MGTC provides office space at its campus for the CLCP and covers all expenses, as part of a ten-year agreement. MGTC also offers in-kind donations, classroom space, instructors, and advice to the CLCP. The college's director of adult literacy donates much of her time to coordinating and improving CLCP services.

Workforce development and adult education needs are unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future.

Businesses play a large role in the CLCP, serving on its board, providing financial support, helping with fund raising, and identifying employees with literacy needs and directing them to CLCP services. Businesses also benefit from the CLCP as the program helps their employees upgrade their literacy skills. The community college has also created the Hispanic Academy, which will offer industry-specific conversational Spanish for employees in ten industries, including law enforcement, banking, healthcare, and others, a significant contribution in an area with a surging immigrant population.

"South Ark," as South Arkansas Community College is known locally, is located in El Dorado, the largest town in rural Union County. Because of the town's size (45,000) and position at the junction of several major highways, many industries have located plants there. But many county residents are impoverished and lack the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. The Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy (WAGE) program provides employment-related education to adult learners and upgrades the basic skills of incumbent workers through community partnerships. South Ark provides a home for WAGE at one of its two campuses.

WAGE offers two types of basic skills training: pre-employment training and training for incumbent workers. Training is developed according to employer needs specified in surveys of the business community and Literacy Task Analyses (LTAs), structured assessments of the skills needed in specific entry-level jobs. Curricula incorporate materials from business partners and are aligned with the competencies needed in the workplace. This flexible approach allows WAGE to adapt to changing community needs, shifting from pre-employment

training when local employers are hiring to upgrading skills of incumbent workers when hiring is dormant.

WAGE is a good fit for South Ark, which traditionally has had a strong workforce development orientation. According to the college's president, "This college really wants to serve businesses." As a sign of their support, college administrators have included WAGE graduates in the graduation ceremonies for all graduates. South Ark, in a location convenient for many businesses, also hosts the regular meetings of the WAGE advisory group, which have become the "place to be for the movers and shakers in the community."

Workforce development and adult education needs are unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. If anything, demands are likely to increase, stretching limited resources to the breaking point. Community partnerships cannot solve every resource problem, but they can enable communities to expand their services to adults who need them and improve the skills of the local workforce. As the foregoing examples show, community colleges can play a leadership role in such partnerships, enlarging their own service to the community in the process.

Donna Fowler is director of communications and Kathy Chernus is senior associate and C-PAL project director at MPR Associates, Inc., an educational research and consulting firm with offices in Washington, DC and Berkeley, CA. Originally published in Community College Journal, June/July 2005 (pp. 48-50). Reprinted with permission.

12 Communities of the C-PAL Initiative

Anchorage, Alaska; El Dorado, Arkansas; San Diego, California; Palm Beach County, Florida; Houston County, Georgia; Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; Louisville/Jefferson County, Kentucky; Holyoke, Massachusetts; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Barberton, Ohio; Portland, Oregon; and Richfield, Fairfield, Lexington, and Newberry Counties, South Carolina. For more information on how these communities were selected, see www.c-pal.net.